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ABSTRACT

Based on models created by social reality researchers, a study used a modification of a Solomon four group design to investigate the influence of symbolic reality (exposure to the film "JFK") on a student audience's subjective reality (knowledge of the assassination of President Kennedy, political mistrust and belief in the existence of a shadow government) and communication behaviors. A total of 74 students were interviewed at one time, most of them within 1 week of seeing "JFK." Approximately 3 weeks later, 143 students were interviewed including 66 of those interviewed earlier. The findings show an influence of exposure to "JFK" on students' knowledge about the assassination, belief in the existence of a shadow government, and interpersonal discussion of the assassination. Findings indicate that "JFK" played a significant role in the development of the audience's image of the Kennedy assassination. (Five tables of data and one figure are included and 42 references are attached.) (Author/SR)

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SYNTHETIC HISTORY AND SUBJECTIVE REALITY

THE IMPACT OF OLIVER STONE'S *JFK*

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Basing their study on models created by social reality researchers, the authors used a modification of a Solomon four group design to investigate the influence of symbolic reality (exposure to the film *JFK*) on a student audience's subjective reality (knowledge of the assassination of President Kennedy, political mistrust and belief in the existence of a shadow government) and communication behaviors. A total of 74 students were interviewed at time one, most of them within one week of seeing *JFK*. Approximately three weeks later, in March, 143 students were interviewed including 66 of those interviewed in February. The findings show an influence of exposure to *JFK* on knowledge about the assassination, belief in the existence of a shadow government, and interpersonal discussion of the assassination. The authors conclude that *JFK* played a significant role in the development of the audience's image of the Kennedy assassination.

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> Members of the media establishment get upset when art gets political, especially when they disagree with the politics and fear the viewpoint. When this priesthood is challenged as the sole or privileged interpreters of *our* history, they bludgeon newcomers, wielding heavy clubs like 'objectivity' and charging high crimes like "rewriting history." The real issue is trusting the people with their real history. (Oliver Stone, 1991, A19)

JFK was film director Oliver Stone's personal account of the 1963 assassination of President John F. Kennedy. Stone presented the story through his interpretation of the activities of New Orleans prosecutor Jim Garrison. The story begins with President Dwight David Eisenhower's warning about the growing power of the military industrial complex. It proceeds to visual'y document the 1963 assassination, and then to retell and reanalyze the assassination through the vantage point of New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison as he builds a conspiracy case against local businessman Clay Shaw. It is through the dramatized account of the events surrounding the assassination, the investigation of the powerful conspirators, and the climatic presentation of evidence in the courtroom that Stone presents his version of history. At the movie's end, Shaw is acquitted of all charges, but the idea of a conspiracy led by a shadow government remains.

JFK was no ordinary movie. It drew considerable critical acclaim, including an Academy Award nomination for the best picture of 1991. But much more than simple film reviews, it generated a vituperate response on the press's news pages by some of its most senior reporters—highly unusual given that *JFK* was still "just a movie." Coverage in *The New York Times* began

nine months before the film's premier ("Oliver Stone faces," 1991; "Oliver Stone gets," 1991). And months before the actual release of the film, negative reviews based on a purloined script were published (Margolis, 1991; Lardner, Jr., 1991; Zoglin, 1991). In particular, George Lardner Jr. lambasted Stone for lending credibility to Jim Garrison's "fictional" account of the Kennedy assassination, *On the Trail of the Assassins* (1988), the film's primary source. *The Washington Post* even surveyed the public about the Kennedy assassination and reported that 56 percent of Americans thought the assassination was the result of a conspiracy (Lardner, 1991).

LIFE, Newsweek, and *Esquire* published cover stories about *JFK* to coincide with the theatrical release of the movie, and virtually all major news magazines and newspapers printed something about the movie in addition to a typical review. While *Esquire* (Ansom, 1991) focused on the events and people involved with the filming, *LIFE* (Grunwald, 1991) and *TIME* (Corliss, 1991) more broadly discussed the variety of conflicting facts and descriptions surrounding the assassination itself. But *Newsweek* (Auchincloss, 1991) directly attacked Stone and the movie by labeling it "propaganda" and "twisted history." As was true of many of the reports, *Newsweek's* Kenneth Auchincloss found fault with the credibility of both Stone's sources and his facts, but his primary complaint was with the docudrama genre as much as with its content and its probable affect on young audiences. Any recreation of an event ultimately distorts the event, but Auchincloss saw a great danger in *JFK* because of the skill with which it was done.

> In "JFK" all these problems are compounded by taking a highly speculative version of events—the Garrison/Stone conspiracy theory—and grafting in onto real events. Only the alert viewer will be able to distinguish real documentary footage from reconstructed scenes, shot in black and white, that often represent Garrison's suppositions about what might have happened. (Auchincloss, 1991)

Tom Wicker, who was in Dallas the day of the assassination, expressed concern about the influence *JFK* might have on youthful movie-goers just two days after the movie's release. Wicker (1991) worried that, "among the many Americans likely to see it, . . . particularly those too young to remember Nov. 22, 1963, 'J.F.K.' is all too likely to be taken as the final, unquestioned explanation."

The coverage of *JFK* by the press has been extraordinary. Between May 1, 1991 and February 1, 1992, 23 separate articles about the movie had been published in *Newsweek*, *US News & World Report*, *Time*, *LIFE*, *Esquire*, *The Economist*, *National Review*, *Maclean's*, *The New Republic*, *The Nation*, and *Rolling Stone* (InfoTrac, 1992). Coverage by the country's major newspapers was similarly voluminous, with lengthy articles and/or editorials running in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Chicago Tribune*, and *USA Today*. Indeed, the press coverage was so voluminous and hostile that Garry Trudeau (1992) was inspired to create a cartoon chronicling the coverage that sarcastically suggested a press conspiracy to assassinate Stone's film.

The questions concerning *JFK* and its possible impact are old ones, raised long ago in the Payne Fund Studies (Lowery & DeFleur, 1988). Many in the press saw the film as media at its worst, a propagandistic attempt to influence an audience to a particular point of view. The press assumed that *JFK* would be able to do this, to convince its audience that its *interpretation* of the history of the assassination was *the* history of the assassination.

We were also concerned with many of the issues raised by journalists and others concerned about the impact of Stone's interpretation of the assassination of John F. Kennedy in *JFK*. Did *JFK* influence its audience's thinking about the assassination, about the facts of the assassination, about the causes of the assassination, and about the existence of sinister forces responsible for the assassination? Through what mechanisms was this influence exerted? Were there reasons to be concerned, as the journalists suggested, that a motion picture could restore the "magic bullet" impact of the media, a simple message exposure to message effect relationship between a media stimulus and an audience response? We developed a theoretical model based on previous theory in social and used a quasi-experimental design to help us answer these questions.

Literature Review

Our literature review is organized in four sections. First, we briefly investigate past research on the influence of motion pictures, television mini-series and docudrama on audience's political and

social attitudes and orientations toward political institutions. We follow that with a review of the research focusing on the development of individual perceptions of "reality" and the psychological mechanisms that might influence this reality development. Third, we present our model, along with the assumptions and rationale used to develop our model. Finally, we present three hypotheses that will be tested in this study.

Film Influences

Kenneth Boulding (1956) did not write about how film influenced people's "images" but he did write about how messages change or fail to change the "images" people have of their world. "Images" are people's store of subjective knowledge about an event, person, or an experience. It is our overall image that determines our behavior. Boulding pointed out that any message has meaning to the extent that it can change our image. Messages often have a limited impact, particularly entertainment messages, and are interpreted as irrelevant to our image. Many messages can have a regularized impact, changing the image in a predictable manner. These types of messages serve to confirm existing beliefs and add detail to images we already hold. A message can also have a profound impact, changing the image in a revolutionary way. We can discover new facts, encounter new theories about why an event happened, and have our convictions about a past "truth" weakened. It is the possibility of revolutionary change in the image, radical change in what people thought about the assassination of President John F. Kennedy in 1963, that worried many in the press.

Film has long been seen as a possible influence on our image of the world. Research on film's influence on racial attitudes and stereotypes began with work done by Peterson and Thurstone (reviewed in Austin, 1989) as part of the Payne Fund Studies of the 20s. Peterson and Thurstone found that attitudes toward minorities could be influenced by a single film exposure. In later research, it was seen that attitudes toward Jews could also influenced by single exposure to a film, the 1947 picture *Gentleman's Agreement* (Austin, 1989). Film was also considered a potential motivator for Army recruits during WWII. Frank Capra's training film, *The Battle of Britain*, was an effective information source but had limited effect as a motivator (Lowery & DeFleur, 1988).

There have been fewer studies of film as an influence on people's orientations toward institutions and those few have produced inconsistent results. Film has been shown to be effective in changing attitudes toward socialism and toward the Works Progress Administration (WPA) in 1938. Other studies have failed to document changes from propaganda films designed to influence attitudes toward the law, toward the Nazis before America's entry into WWII (Austin, 1989).

Recently, studies have focused on the influence of television mini-series and docudramas. Studies have been done on *Roots*, *Shogun*, and *Holocaust*. The research indicates mixed results on the effects of these mini-series on attitudes (Walker, 1989). Research on *The Day After* (Adams & Webber, 1984) indicated that viewers of the 1983 docudrama believed more in the possibility of a nuclear attack, were less likely to want the President to get tougher with Russia, and wanted more money spent for protection from nuclear attack.

Similar studies were conducted around ABC's 1985 mini-series *Amerika*. Seeing *Amerika*, was related to increased concern about a communist threat and to support for a stronger military defense (Walker, 1989). Lasorsa (1989) found evidence of a "third person" effect for viewers of *Amerika*. Approximately 30% of the viewers felt that *Amerika* would have little impact on themselves but would have a strong impact on others. Lasorsa also found little difference between viewers and nonviewers on political opinion regarding the UN, civil defense, and the Soviet threat.

Perhaps the only recent film having a potential impact similar to that feared for *JFK* was the 1976 film, *All the President's Men*. Elliott and Schenck-Hamlin (1979) used a student sample of 115 undergraduates (including 42 who had seen the film) to investigate the film's influence on political attitudes and on attitudes toward the press. Seeing *All the President's Men* was associated with increased political alienation, and there was an interaction between political party and attendance on attitudes toward the press. Republicans who had seen the film became more antagonistic toward the press while democrats who had seen the film became more supportive.

While studies done regarding the influence of movies, mini-series, and docudrama have tended to be atheoretical, they have provided a basis for some tentative conclusions regarding possible film impact. First, movies, docudrama, and mini-series can influence people's knowledge about

the subject of the film in consistent ways. Second, attitudes can be influenced by exposure to a film but the mechanism for such influence is unclear. Because the majority of studies looking at movies, docudrama, and mini-series were not tests of theories, there is little in these studies to help determine why attitude change happened or failed to happen. Third, the fact that the majority of motion pictures are entertainment oriented and not designed to send a "message" has undoubtedly reduced the willingness and interest of researchers to study film and other film-like messages as serious elements in the creation of political attitudes and knowledge. This has limited the available pool of information on which to develop models and theory. We think this is an oversight.

Reality Construction

While studies of film and related messages may provide little in the way of theoretical insight or appropriate models for the study of possible film influence, there exists a significant body of research linking media images to personal images of reality. Lippmann (1922) raised the issue early. He saw that the linkages between the scene of an event, the report of the event, and the response to the event as a likely situation where information coming to the public would be distorted because of censorship, limited social contact, restricted time for reporting and learning, distortions from compression, symbol simplification, and the fear of facing facts. The "pictures in our heads," based on reports of events, create our actions. To the degree that these reports are inaccurate, then the possibility of serious errors in action result.

Adoni and Mane (1984) saw media's potential impact as part of its role in a three element model. Media images are part of symbolic reality, abstractions of experience that are created by individuals and groups as a way of storing information. Two other "realities," objective and subjective, form a triangular "reality" concept. Objective reality refers to the raw material of direct experience, the objects, things, events, happenings that human beings contact by sight, smell, hearing, and taste. Subjective reality is the image of the world constructed by the individual based on the inputs from objective and symbolic realities. It is subjective reality that guides our behaviors, structures our cognitions, and influences our attitudes. We can only act on what we think. To the degree that subjective reality is based primarily on symbolic reality (including the type

of reality possible through motion pictures), the media assume a more central role in the construction of subjective realities. Subjective reality parallels Boulding's (1956) image.

Synthetic experience (Funkhouser & Shaw,1990) is a recent addition to the concept if symbolic reality. Technology has made it possible for symbolic reality to exhibit characteristics impossible in real experience. Activities can be speeded up (fast-forward), slowed down (slow motion), replayed (instant replay). Images can be changed from far away to a close-up (zoom), abruptly shift in time, space, or locale (cut), merge from one to another (dissolve), and experience computer alteration in form in a way never observed in a person's real-life experience. This "synthetic experience" now shares time with real experience. Even in news presentations, events can be shown in a way that is more exciting, stimulating, and even thought provoking than the "real experience" upon which the reports are based. Our perceptions of reality are being shaped by synthetic experience. And our ideas of history are more and more based on a "synthetic history" made up of "synthetic facts" from a "synthetic world."

Cultivation analysis has added significantly to our understanding of the ways that media exposure can influence subjective reality. Gerbner, Gross, Signorielli, Morgan and Jackson-Beeck (1979) have made the assumptions of this model explicit: television viewing is ritualistic and non-selective; programming on television presents an interrelated set of stories made similar because all are produced for the same market considerations; the reality that society constructs, a reality largely formed by television, provides the audience with an image of the way the world is; the "cultivation effect" is not based on a single exposure but occurs as the result of years of heavy viewing of television programming.

Although cultivation research has received significant criticism over the years (see the "Dialogue" chapter in Whitney, Wartella, & Windahl, 1982), consistent low correlations linking heavy exposure to certain types of effects—primarily in overestimations of the extent or probability of specific facts or beliefs (probability of being involved in crime, seeing the world as a mean place)—have been documented over many years and many studies (Hawkins, Pingree, & Adler, 1987).

Social reality is a more broadly based theoretical orientation that includes cultivation as well as areas often labeled as perceived reality or something similar. We define social reality as that part of people's beliefs about the world that are based on mediated sources of information and not on direct sensory experience (Elliott & Slater, 1980). The process of how social units create these messages has been the subject of recent work by Shoemaker and Reese (1991). While Shoemaker and Reese look at the social construction of a symbolic media reality, our research interest is on the influence of this symbolic media reality on subjective reality.

Most social reality research has looked at the influence of social reality on individual perceptions of reality, often termed "perceived reality" (Potter, 1988). Potter has summarized research within this area and has put forward several generalizations. First, a number of variables have been found to influence reality perceptions. Real-life experience apparently reduces people's likelihood of accepting media images as real. Ability also seems to be negatively related to the acceptance of media portrayals. It may be, however, that measures of ability are also measuring previous knowledge about the topic (through reading, for example). Motivation has also been shown to be related to perceptions of reality. Watching television to obtain information seems to be related to acceptance of media images as realistic. Motivation may also be related to the attention given to media messages and it may be that attention results in increased reality perceptions. Media exposure is also related to reality perceptions. A partial explanation of this finding is that, over time media models become a norm for reality expectations. Current messages may well be compared with previous messages to determine the degree of fit. Second, Potter has also found evidence that reality perceptions can be experimentally manipulated to show short-term influences on attitudes and behavioral change in the direction advocated in the message.

A number of scholars have developed explanations demonstrating the mechanisms by which media reality becomes part of the individual's image of reality. Perse (1990) has proposed a four stage model triggered by involvement ("a sense of importance attached to an object, person, or issue," "intellectual and emotional participation during message reception;" p. 53). Perse suggested that message content must be judged as "real" before it becomes the basis for additions or

modifications of an individual's perception of social reality. Once involvement is triggered, attention ("allocating cognitive effort to process the information"), recognition ("categorizing the information as familiar or unfamiliar"), and elaboration ("relating the information to prior knowledge") can follow.

Another approach researchers have followed is to break down the process of media influences on subjective reality by examining first- and second-order beliefs. Hawkins, Pingree and Adler (1987) tested a model posing what they term "demographic beliefs" (beliefs about social reality) as the linkage between television viewing and more general values and beliefs (second-order beliefs). Their findings, based on one sample of adults and three of adolescents, did not support the model. Demographic beliefs did not intervene between exposure and second-order beliefs. They concluded that second-order beliefs did not differ from first-order beliefs for viewers and were influenced by the same factors. Furthermore, they suggested that learning may not be an appropriate exposure effect but rather that cultivation deals with reinforcement of cultural stereotypes.

Potter (1991) tested a similar model linking exposure to first-order beliefs (quantitative estimates of occurrences) and to second-order beliefs (generalized beliefs implied by first-order beliefs) based on the TV world. This linkage between exposure and TV beliefs was labeled "learning." Potter's model also included direct paths from exposure to first- and second-order beliefs about the real world, the process of "cultivation." He also reasoned that first-order beliefs would influence second-order beliefs ("generalization") and that first-order beliefs about the TV world would influence first-order beliefs about the real world (first-order construction) while second-order TV world beliefs would influence second-order real world beliefs (second-order construction).

Potter found that first-order construction did take place with estimates about the TV world correlating with estimates about the real world and that the process of generalization from first-order to second-order beliefs also was supported. The idea of cultivation, that is, that exposure would link to real world first- and second-order beliefs was supported for first-order beliefs only. There was no learning effect.

Shapiro and Lang (1991) have focused more closely on the process by which reality perceptions are created, suggesting that a process called "reality monitoring" uses contextual information associated with event memory to make reality decisions. The contextual information includes information on the information source, physiological states associated with the message, and judgments about its realism. Basically, all stimuli are treated as "real" from the organism's standpoint. Higher order judgments are necessary to determine whether or not an orienting response or another type of response (startle or defensive) should be invoked or maintained. Reality verification processes become the basis for possible perceived reality and social reality effects.

In the case of a film like *JFK*, where the director has taken great pains to make the film appear similar to the event, where the message appears to capture the reality of the time and place of the actual event, and where individual audience members may identify with a central film character such as Kevin Costner, it is possible that movie cues can seem to be part of actual events. Add to this the generation of strong emotion, and movie event memories may become biased toward being included as part of subjective reality.

Messages that generate higher levels of thinking about the message are likely to have lasting effects in terms of changes in attitudes, knowledge, and behavior. Petty and Cacioppo's (1986) elaboration likelihood model has been used to explain the relationships between motivation to process a message, ability to process a message, and the nature of cognitive processing as the determinants of the degree of change in an image that can result from a message. In the case of *JFK*, where information was often presented in a court setting with "evidence" countering existing (Warren Commission) explanations, the chance for deeper and more extensive thinking about the message is maximized. Such internal thought makes *JFK* an ideal message for extensive elaboration.

Our Model

First, we advance a series of assumptions based on the reviewed literature.

1. People attempt to construct a "subjective reality" based on information they receive from "objective" and "symbolic" sources. This subjective reality contains affective as well as factual components. Affective components strengthen the memory, making it more likely to be recalled regarding information on the event, real or mediated. For a significant percentage of our reality "images," the only source of information comes from symbolic sources. For anyone born during the 1960s or later, the assassination of President Kennedy is known only through symbolic reality, many times removed from the actual event.

2. The mechanisms for constructing subjective reality are complex but understandable. These mechanisms include:

   a. Comparing new information with existing information. To the degree that new information adds to the existing store, it modifies that store. Information that is not perceived as new is not added to the store. However, it may serve as an indicator of overall reality because it adds to the frequency with which an experience has been encountered. As such, it confirms an existing information base and adds to the subjective probability that the constructed image is "real."

   b. Evaluating the information in terms of its perceived reality. To the degree that a message is perceived as real, then it is more likely to be stored within a "real" memory grouping or, later in time, to be confused with "real" events. To the degree that a message creates a "synthetic experience" in making its point, it may become more effective than the experience of the actual event. For many who experienced the assassination of John Kennedy (either those along the parade route in Dallas or those linked to the events by the media), the first hours were confusing, with a variety of reports, speculations, and fears. Younger people have seen only summary statements where much of the ambiguity of the real event has been eliminated, where answers to questions have been offered, where emotion has been replaced by logical presentations. Instant replay of the impact of the bullet that struck John Kennedy in the head, the replay of the motorcade and its route, the view in *JFK* showing the limo through the crosshairs of the assassin's gunsight—all provide reality cues that can lead to doubt among people who remember the assassination and to acceptance as "real" by those who are too young to remember.

   c. Messages and parts of messages are evaluated by the individual. They have no "meaning" aside from their influence on the person using them. While a message may

be fictional, elements of that message may be interpreted as "real" or "realistic." Fictional events, perhaps particularly film events, are often explicit attempts to make what is fantastical appear as "real," increasing audience response to the message. Part of the fascination of fantasy films such as *Terminator II* must lie in the "realistic" portrayal of clearly "unrealistic" events.

d. Messages that generate thought by the audience, that force the audience to elaborate about the message, even to discuss it with other people, are most likely to be associated with changes in images. This elaboration can be increased if:

   1) The audience is interested in and pays attention to the message. Most entertainment media count on audience attention and interest to attract an audience;

   2) Where information in a message is presented in a way requiring audience evaluation of information, audience participation in a reasoning process, elaboration will be increased (in *JFK* the use of logical argument and point-counterpoint presentation in a movie trial scene where previous explanations of the assassination are carefully compared with new interpretations);

   3) Relevance, the relationship between events and the person's own life, can also increase elaboration (and consequently message influence) by forcing the individual to weigh information's possible consequences for the person (Roser, 1990);

3. Multiple exposure to a message is not required for influence. This is particularly true in the case of messages on novel topics and messages dealing with topics that have not been well defined.

The model we have developed is presented in Figure 1. It is composed of three elements. There is an **objective reality** which we define as an event occurring in real time and space. In this case, the event of interest is the assassination of President John F. Kennedy in 1963. Following the Adoni and Mane model (1984), there is also a **symbolic reality.** Symbolic reality is defined as the stored messages regarding an event.

We have broken the symbolic reality of President Kennedy's assassination into three components: unsanctioned symbolic reality, sanctioned symbolic reality, and synthetic experience. We define **unsanctioned symbolic reality** as those stored messages running counter to accounts published by official sources (major mass media, government, mainstream academics).

Sanctioned reality is defined as the official accounts of an event. In the case of the assassination of President Kennedy, it refers to the Warren Commission Report, the reports of the House and Senate investigating committees, and the general reports by the establishment news media in this country.

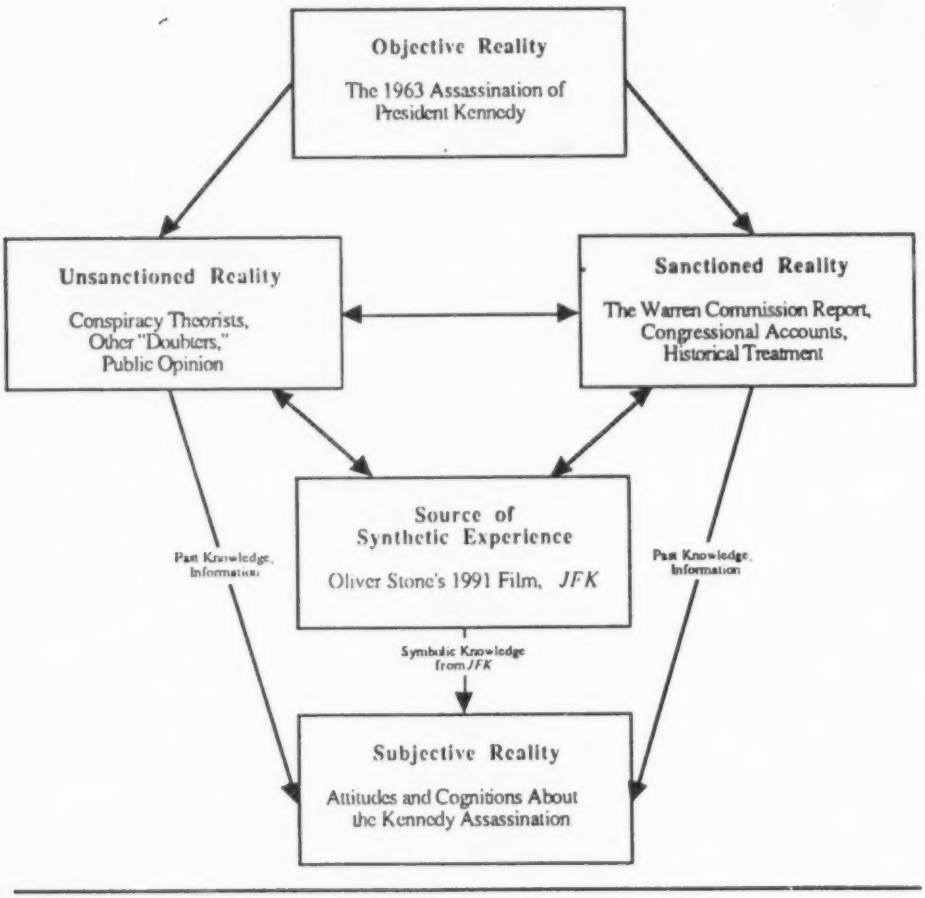
Objective Reality
The 1963 Assassination of President Kennedy
Unsanctioned Reality
Conspiracy Theorists, Other "Doubters," Public Opinion
Sanctioned Reality
The Warren Commission Report, Congressional Accounts, Historical Treatment
Source of Synthetic Experience
Oliver Stone's 1991 Film, JFK
Past Knowledge, Information
Past Knowledge, Information
Symbolic Knowledge from JFK
Subjective Reality
Attitudes and Cognitions About the Kennedy Assassination

Figure 1

Synthetic experience refers to stored images that are enhanced through technology. Many of the news accounts of the assassination used technology to enhance news presentations. Instant replay, slow motion, close-ups, etc., became an accepted (and unnoticed) part of the assassination coverage. In *JFK*, Oliver Stone used film technology to recreate many of the assassination events, to intermix archival film footage of the assassination with his own black and white "newsreel" footage, and to show "flashbacks" to the assassination and related events.

Finally, there is subjective reality, the stored image held by the individual regarding the event and influences that might be associated with the event (such as attitudes toward government, etc.). It is subjective reality that guides future beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. For each of us, this subjective reality, in this case our subjective reality about the Kennedy assassination, represents part of our image of the world. This "reality" results from our experiences with unsanctioned and sanctioned reports as well as attendance at Oliver Stone's 1991 film, *JFK*. Our interests are on the possibility that a single message such as *JFK* could impact our subjective reality of the assassination.

Hypotheses

H1: Exposure to a synthetic experience will influence an individual's subjective reality in the direction suggested in the synthetic experience. Exposure to a synthetically created experience, such as *JFK*, will alter the following:

1. First-order beliefs, the "facts" about the Kennedy assassination (Potter, 1991; Hawkins, Pingree, & Adler, 1987). We have developed two sets of first-order beliefs.

    a. *Objective knowledge*. We have defined "objective knowledge" as information which is undisputed. In the case of knowledge regarding President Kennedy's assassination, it would include knowledge of when the assassination took place, individuals involved with the assassination and its investigation, etc.

    b. *Symbolic knowledge*. "Symbolic knowledge" refers to that information whose source is based almost entirely (does not tie to either sanctioned reality or to objective reality) on synthetic experience. In this case, symbolic reality is composed of the probability of certain events such as the existence of at least three assassination teams, Lee Harvey Oswald working for the CIA, etc., which were stressed in *JFK*.

2. Second-order beliefs, generalizations from "facts" to perceptions about more general processes. Not only will exposure to *JFK* result in changes in the "facts" surrounding the assassination but to changes in feelings individuals have about institutions and general principles of government. We measured two sets of second-order beliefs.

a. *Political mistrust.* Political mistrust refers to the lack of belief in the government's willingness to help individuals and lack of belief in the ability of individuals to influence government.

b. *Belief in the existence of a "shadow government."* A "shadow government" is a secret and powerful group of people who actually run the United States, a group whose existence was suggested in *JFK*. It is this latter variable, the existence of a "shadow government," that is most closely tied to the content of *JFK*.

H2: Exposure to a synthetic experience will stimulate increased communication behavior regarding that experience. These behaviors include attention to media stories, interpersonal discussion, and other communication activities about the assassination (reading books, attending lectures, reading an article in the campus paper).

H3: There will be a positive correlation between the perceived realism of synthetically created experience (defined as how closely *JFK* corresponded to individual estimates of what real-life must have been like at the time of the assassination), first- and second-order beliefs, and communication behavior. Exposure alone would not guarantee the influence of a filmed message. The effect will be dependent on the perceived realism of the message. No one would expect the movie *Airplane* to influence how people think about commercial airline travel because of the unrealistic way it portrayed the airline industry. However, the perceived realism of *Dances with Wolves* might well have influenced perceptions of native Americans.

To test the first two hypotheses (first- and second-order beliefs, communication behaviors) we used multiple classification analysis. Multiple classification allowed us to inspect the adjusted mean scores for our exposure groups after controlling for the covariates (political interest, magazine use, newspaper use, television news use, television talk show use, past information seeking about the assassination) and the other independent variable (whether or not respondents had been interviewed twice). The number of times the respondents had been interviewed allowed us to determine if sensitization had been a problem and it allowed us to make some judgments about changing influence over time.

To test the third hypothesis (correlation between perceived realism, first- and second-order beliefs, and communication behavior) we correlated perceived realism with each dependant variable after partialling for previous information seeking and political interest.

Method

Design

The respondents used for this study was recruited from students enrolled in introductory Journalism laboratory sections. Pretesting was done with students from senior level Journalism classes and from classes in the Department of Radio-Television.

Twelve lab sections were assigned to either film or control groups, six to each category. Students in the six film classes were contacted during the week of January 30, 1992, and offered free passes to attend the motion picture *JFK* at a local theater anytime between February 6 and February 12, 1992. Students who had already seen the film were not offered tickets. Of the 90 students originally contacted in the experimental classes, 74 agreed to attend the film during the suggested time period, 9 had already seen the film, 5 refused for various reasons, and 2 had participated in a pretest in another class and were not included in the sample. Of the 74 who agreed to see the film, 61 attended during the week of February 6 through February 12. No contact was made with the control group classes prior to February 12.

We used a modification of the Solomon four group design (Campbell & Stanley, 1963) without random assignment to conditions. Instead of a pretest-posttest design, ours is a posttest and post/posttest design. It is presented in Figure 2. Three laboratory classes were assigned to each condition. Of the 74 students who answered the Wave 1 questionnaire, 60.8% had seen the film. Of the 143 students who completed the Wave 2 questionnaire, 64.3% had seen the film. Eight students who were interviewed in February were not available to be interviewed in March.

Film Group		
Tickets to Attend *JFK* February 6-12	Measure right after attendance February 13-14	Measure three weeks after first measure March 4-9
Tickets to Attend *JFK* February 6-12		Measure March 4-9
Control Group		
No Tickets for *JFK*	Measure February 12-14	Measure three weeks after first measure March 4-9
No Tickets for *JFK*		Measure March 4-9

Figure 2

Use of this design allowed us to test short- and longer-term effects, to test for instrument sensitization, and to test for differences between film attenders who were given tickets by us and film attenders who paid their own way to see *JFK*. Because of the small Ns in several of the analyses (Ns ranging from 40 to 44), we presented findings for probability levels of .10 or less.

Variables

Independent variables. Our primary independent variable was **exposure to *JFK***. We grouped our respondents into those who had not seen the film, those who had seen the film prior to February 6 (when students we had given tickets began attending *JFK*), and those who had seen *JFK* on February 6 or later. We decided to analyze those who had seen the film before we intervened as separate from those who attended on passes for several reasons. First, those who saw the film prior to February 6 might have decided to see *JFK* because of a long time interest in the assassination, because they were politically involved, or for a variety of reasons that might differentiate them from those who saw *JFK* because we gave them a ticket. Second, it is possible that the influence of *JFK* would be short-term, still apparent near the time of exposure but decreasing rapidly over time. *JFK* was released on December 13, 1991, over the holiday break. This is the time most of the students who saw the film before February 6 attended. Their

memories might have changed considerably before the week of February 6 when students who received free tickets attended.

For the respondents interviewed in February (N=74), 37.8% had not seen the film, 14.9% saw the film before February 6, and 47.3% saw the film on February 6 or later. For respondents interviewed in March (N=143), 35.7% had not seen the film, 20.3% had seen it prior to February 6, 44.1% saw it February 6 or later.

Our second independent variable coded whether or not the respondent had been interviewed in both February and March (**post and post/post tests**). This measure was applicable only for the analysis of the March data and was used to test for possible sensitization influences of the February test.

Our third independent variable, used only with those who had seen the film, measured the **perceived reality** of *JFK*. Our perceived realism was adapted from Elliott, Rudd and Good's (1983) perceived plausibility and perceived superficiality measures. We defined it as the degree to which individuals see messages as similar to the real world. Five Likert type items (ranging on a five point scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree) were summed to create the scale (Cronbach's alpha = .62). The perceived reality score for *JFK* ranged from 13 to 25. The February mean (N=44) was 20.25 with a standard deviation of 2.06. The March mean (N=92) was 19.61 with a standard deviation of 2.22.

Covariates. There were a series of variables likely to influence a number of our measures, particularly the knowledge questions. These were political interest, media use, and past information seeking behavior regarding the Kennedy assassination. **Political interest,** a concern about the general process of governing and being governed, was measured by the respondent's answer to the question, "How interested would you say you are in politics *in general*?" on a scale running from 1 (completely uninterested) to 5 (extremely interested). The mean score for this variable in February was 3.51 with a standard deviation of 1.02. The mean for political interest in March was 3.55 with a standard deviation of .84.

We covaried for four measures of current media use. **Magazine use** was coded by summing respondents regular (using at least once a month) use of five magazines: *Time*, *Newsweek*, *US News & World Report*, *LIFE*, and *Esquire*. These magazines were selected because each had run a feature story on *JFK*. The mean for magazine use in February was .42 with a standard deviation of .84. In March the mean was .52 and the standard deviation was .82. **Newspaper use** was similarly coded. Respondents were asked which of four local and regional newspapers they regularly (at least once a week) read. The mean for newspaper use in February was 2.00 with a standard deviation of .79. The March mean and standard deviation were 1.87 and .69 respectively.

Television news use was constructed by summing regular (at least once a week for daily programs, once a month for weekly programs) television use which included network news, CNN, *Nightline*, *60 Minutes*, *48 Hours*, and *Primetime*. The mean for television news use in February was 2.43 with a standard deviation of 1.41. In March the mean was 2.30 with a standard deviation of 1.65. Television talk show use was also included because of the appearance by Oliver Stone and Kevin Costner (the director and star of *JFK*, respectively) on various shows. The shows were *Entertainment Tonight*, *Current Affairs*, and a global "TV talk shows." The February mean for television talk show use was 1.58 with a standard deviation of 1.07. In March the mean was 1.56 and the standard deviation was 1.15.

Past information seeking about the assassination, the purposive seeking and consumption of topic relevant messages, was formed by summing all positive responses to a series or questions asking respondents if they had ever read a book about the Kennedy assassination, ever written a paper about the Kennedy assassination (including high school) and ever gone to the library to look up information about the Kennedy assassination. The range for past information seeking was 0 to 3. For the February administration, the mean was .82 and the standard deviation was 1.18. The March mean was .89, and the standard deviation was 1.08.

Dependent variables. Our dependent variables fall into three groups. The first group included what Hawkins, Pingree and Adler (1987) termed first-order beliefs. First order beliefs are the "facts" associated with an event. Our second set of dependent variables were measures of

second-order beliefs, political mistrust and belief in a shadow government. Second-order beliefs represent the generalizations from first-order beliefs (the "facts") to more global perceptions and processes. The third set of dependent variables included measures of communication activity including discussing the assassination with others, reading about the assassination in newspapers and or magazines, seeing items about the assassination on television, reading a book about the assassination, writing a paper about the assassination, going to the library to look up information about the assassination, attending a lecture about the assassination, or reading a story about the assassination in the campus paper.

We looked at two sets of first-order beliefs. **Objective knowledge** was measured by summing the correct answers of each respondent to six questions. Five of the questions were in multiple choice format. They asked where the only conspiracy trial for the assassination of President Kennedy took place (New Orleans), the year of the assassination (1963), the name of the member of the Warren Commission who Kennedy had fired as Director of the CIA (Allen Dulles), the name of the district attorney prosecuting the only person charged with conspiracy to assassinate President Kennedy (Jim Garrison), and the crime Lee Harvey Oswald was charged with when he was arrested (shooting a police officer). The final objective knowledge question asked respondents to indicate whether it was probably false, probably true, or they weren't sure whether or not the presidential motorcade had slowed down just before the first shot (probably true was the correct answer). The range for objective knowledge was from 0 to 6. The mean for the February administration was 3.28 with a standard deviation of 1.89. For the March administration the mean was 3.30 and the standard deviation was 1.69.

Our second set of first-order beliefs was labeled **symbolic knowledge.** Symbolic knowledge referenced the unsanctioned facts of *JFK*, those assertions that have not been advocated by official sources. Respondents were asked for probabilistic responses (probably false, not sure, probably true) to five statements clearly stressed as true in the film: that President Kennedy was planning to withdraw all military advisors from Vietnam, that most telephone lines in Washington, DC were out of order just after the assassination, that President Kennedy had planned to normalize

relations with Cuba, that Lee Harvey Oswald had worked for the CIA, and that President Kennedy was killed in a cross-fire involving at least three assassination teams. A sixth statement, that Lee Harvey Oswald had acted alone in carrying out the assassination, was presented in *JFK* as false. This was added to the symbolic measure. The final item was based on subjects' responses of four or more to the question, "How many shots were fired during the Kennedy assassination?" The Warren Commission indicated only three shots were fired. The range for symbolic knowledge was from 0 to 7. The mean for the February administration was 4.53 with a standard deviation of 1.75. For March the mean was 4.32 with a standard deviation of 1.72.

We used two measures of second-order beliefs. Second-order beliefs refer to general beliefs regarding regarding institutions, objects, people, etc. Second-order beliefs serve as guides for behavior and activity. In many ways, they represent summary evaluations of institutions. Our second-order beliefs were tied to political orientations.

We labeled our first political orientation variable **political mistrust.** Political mistrust, which we defined as lack of belief in the government's ability to serve the needs of the public, was adapted from the political cynicism scale reproduced in Robinson, Rusk and Head (1968). They defined political cynicism as "the extent to which one is contemptuously distrustful of politicians and the political process" (p. 479). Our measure includes some of the political cynicism items originally developed by Agger, Goldstein, and Pearl (1961), some items of our own invention, and several items developed as part of Campbell, Gurin, and Miller's (1954) political efficacy scale. Political efficacy refers to the person's belief that individual voters are important parts of the political process.

Nine Likert type items[1] were summed to form the mistrust scale (Cronbach's alpha = .76, March administration). The range for political mistrust was from 13 to 36. The mean for the February administration was 25.50 with a standard deviation of 4.86. The March mean was 24.90 with a standard deviation of 4.66.

Our second political orientation measure was belief in a **shadow government**, a secret and powerful group of people who actually run the United States. Operationally, belief in a shadow

government was constructed by summing four Likert type items into a single score (Cronbach's alpha = .75, March administration). Each respondent indicated whether they strongly disagreed, disagreed, were neutral, agreed, or strongly agreed with the following statements:

1. The truth is that a small group of very powerful men really run this country.
2. Powerful people in government are willing to violate the Constitution in order to serve the interests of big business and the military.
3. There is a small group of people in this country who have the power to do almost anything, even to assassinate our own leaders.
4. The CIA, FBI, and the military use covert methods to stop politicians who are trying to change things.

Responses ranged from 8 to 20. The mean for the belief in a shadow government was 14.16 with a standard deviation of 2.93 in February. The March mean 13.94 with a standard deviation of 2.62.

Our behavioral measures asked respondents if, within the last two weeks, they had done three activities not at all (1), once or twice (2), sometimes (3), often (4), or very often (5). The activities included discussing the Kennedy assassination, reading about the Kennedy assassination in magazines or newspapers, and seeing something on television about the Kennedy assassination. The February mean for discussions about the assassination was 2.45 with a standard deviation of 1.11. In March the mean was 2.46 and the standard deviation was .93. Reading about the assassination had a mean of 1.92 and a standard deviation of 1.11 in February; a mean of 2.34 and a standard deviation of 1.15 in March. Seeing television stories about the assassination had a February mean of 2.58 and standard deviation of 1.07. In March the TV mean was 2.70 with a standard deviation of 1.19.

The final behavioral measure was operationalized slightly differently in February and March. In February, each respondent was asked whether they had read a book about the assassination, written a paper about the assassination, and gone to the library to look up information about the assassination within the last two months. Positive responses were summed providing a *recent communication acts* scale ranging from 0 to 3. The mean was .08 with a standard deviation of .28.

In March we added two additional activities, reading a story about the assassination that had appeared as a feature in the campus newspaper and attending a public lecture. The reason for this last addition was that an assassination researcher was making a presentation at a local restaurant on February 13. The range for recent communication acts in March was from 0 to 5. The mean was .49 with a standard deviation of .90.

Results

Our tests of H1, which stated that synthetically recreated experience will result in changes in subjective reality (first- and second-order beliefs) matching the synthetic experience, found consistent support for first-order beliefs. The results are presented in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 Here

For both first-order belief measures, objective (consensual) knowledge and symbolic (*JFK*) knowledge, exposure to *JFK* was a strong predictor of knowledge. Of the respondents interviewed in February, those seeing the film February 6 or later (mainly those we had sent to the film) had the highest mean objective knowledge (4.45) followed by those who had seen the film earlier (3.61). Those who had not seen the film had the lowest mean score (1.68). This finding holds after controlling for the covariates. Of the covariates, political interest accounted for 3.5% of the variation. The full model accounted for 52.8% of the variation in objective knowledge with exposure to *JFK* emerging as the strongest contributor ($\beta = .68$).

A separate one-way analysis of variance indicated that both those seeing the film before February 6 and those seeing it February 6 and later differed significantly from those who had not seen the film.[2]

The pattern was the same for respondents interviewed in March. The highest mean objective knowledge scores were for the subjects seeing the film on February 6 or later (4.16) followed by those who saw it before February 6 (3.99) and those who did not see the film (1.83). This time, magazine reading accounted for 3.1% of the variation in objective knowledge and past

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assassination information accounted for an additional 7.0%. The total model accounted for 54.5% of the variation in objective knowledge in March, again with *JFK* exposure explaining the greatest portion of the variation ($\beta = .65$).

We again used a one-way analysis of variance to test for the difference between exposure groups. Both film exposure groups differed significantly from the group that had not seen the film. There were no significant sensitization effects noted for this or for any of the remaining seven March analyses where sensitization was a possibility.

The pattern observed for objective knowledge is repeated for symbolic knowledge measured in February. Those seeing the film on February 6 or later had the highest knowledge scores (5.49) closely followed by those who saw the film before February 6 (4.74). Respondents who had not seen the film had the lowest mean scores (3.25). The full model accounted for 43.4% of the variation in the February measure of symbolic knowledge. The covariate measuring past assassination information accounted for 3.0% of the variation. Again, exposure to *JFK* was the strongest influence ($\beta = .59$).

Similar relationships held in March. Those who had seen *JFK*, whether before February 6 (mean = 4.40) or on February 6 or later (mean = 4.97), had higher adjusted mean scores than those who had not seen *JFK* (mean = 3.45). Magazine reading explained 2.0% of the total variation while past information seeking about the assassination accounted for and additional 6.2%. The full model accounted for 25.5% of the variation with exposure to *JFK* accounting for the largest percentage of total variation ($\beta=.39$).

Our one-way analysis of variance indicated that those groups who saw the film before February 6 and who saw the film on February 6 or later differed significantly in their symbolic knowledge from those who had not seen the film. The differences held in February and March.

The pattern for a film influence on first-order beliefs is clear. Exposure to *JFK* increased objective knowledge about the assassination of President Kennedy and it increased the likelihood that viewers would accept Oliver stone's presentation of events associated with the assassination as possible (symbolic knowledge). This finding held whether the interviews were conducted in

February or March and they held independently of when the respondents had seen *JFK*. As a source of information, including "synthetic facts," *JFK* functioned very well.

The results of our multiple classification analysis of the influence of exposure to *JFK* on second-order beliefs (political orientations) are presented in Table 2. This pattern is not as neat as for first-order beliefs but is still understandable. The influence of *JFK* was noted only for one of our political orientations, belief in a shadow government. No significant influence of *JFK* exposure was noted for political mistrust.

Insert Table 2 Here

February respondents who had seen *JFK* on February 6 or later had the highest mean score on belief in a shadow government (15.38). Those who saw *JFK* before that had a lower adjusted mean score (13.04) as did those who had not seen the movie (mean = 13.08). No covariate explained a significant proportion of the variation. The full model accounted for 19.9% of the total variation.

Our one-way analysis of variance indicated that the only significant difference in the mean scores for belief in a shadow government was the difference between those who had seen the film on February 6 or later and those who had not seen the film at all.

Nothing changed during the March administration. The highest adjusted mean score was for those who saw the film on February 6 or later (14.60) followed by those seeing *JFK* before February 6 (14.13) and those who had not seen the film (12.98). One of the covariates, television news exposure, accounted for 2.8% of the variation. The full model accounted for 11.1% of the variation.

As in February, the one-way analysis of variance indicated a statistically significant difference between the group interviewed February 6 or later and those who had not seen the film. The overall F-ratio for the one-way analysis of variance was statistically significant ($p < .05$).

While generalizing from these observations is more complicated than generalizing from the results for first-order beliefs, a pattern does appear and it does make sense. First, well established

attitudes dealing with very general beliefs, such as political mistrust, are not easily influenced, even by a film as powerful as *JFK*. The differences between our exposure groups were very slight. However, for a set of beliefs that are likely to be in the formative stages, such as a belief in the existence of a shadow government, there is a film exposure influence. This influence is strongest when measures are taken near the time of exposure. They seem to decline over time, but not to the point where they disappear. Some residual evidence of the influence is still there at least four weeks after seeing *JFK*.

Our tests of H2, that exposure to *JFK* would result in increased communication behavior regarding that experience, found strong support for one of our communication behaviors, interpersonal discussion, a very slight support for recent communication acts. Film exposure was not statistically related to reading about the assassination or to seeing something on TV about the assassination. The findings for all communication behaviors are found in Tables 3 and 4.

Insert Tables 3 and 4 Here

Discussing the assassination was associated with film attendance. For the February administration, both those who saw the film before February 6 and those seeing it on February 6 or later had higher adjusted mean scores than those who had not seen *JFK* (means of 2.83, 2.91, and 1.72 respectively). Political interest was also associated with discussion, explaining 3.8% of the variation. The full model accounted for 40.2% of the total variation in our February discussion measure.

The March results were similar. Those who had not seen the film had the lowest adjusted mean scores (2.02) while those seeing the film before February 6 and those seeing it on February 6 or later had higher adjusted mean scores (means of 2.71 and 2.70 respectively). In March, political interest accounted for 1.6% of the total variation while past information seeking about the assassination accounted for 6.1%. The full model accounted for 25.3% of the variation.

One-way analysis of variance results indicated that both film attending groups differed significantly from the non-attenders in February and March.

There was a slight tendency ($p < .10$) in March for viewers of *JFK* to have participated recently in some communication act related to the assassination (reading a book writing a paper, going to the library, attending a public lecture, reading an article in the campus paper). The means for those seeing *JFK* before February 6 (.73) and on February 6 or later (.54) were higher than the mean for those who had not seen the film (.29). Past information seeking was strongly related, accounting for 12.4% of the variation. The full March model accounted for 18.0% of the total variation in recent communication acts about the assassination.

These results may not be as disappointing as they seem, at least in terms of support for a behavioral effect. The only communication activity we measured where the respondent had control over the behavior was interpersonal discussion. They elected to talk with others. For reading about the assassination, seeing TV stories about the assassination, and seeking information about the assassination, options were limited and largely out of individual control. The students could not read what was not printed nor could they watch what was not on television. However, although it was not statistically significant overall, of the eight students who went to see a public lecture about the assassination, seven had seen *JFK*. Of the 91 people who had seen *JFK*, 26.4% recalled seeing a feature in the campus about the assassination. Only 14.0% of the 50 people who had not seen *JFK* recalled seeing the story.

H3 proposed a positive correlation between perceived realism, defined as how closely *JFK* corresponded to individual estimates of what real-life must have been like at the time of the assassination, and the knowledge, political orientation, and communication behavior measures. The zero and partial correlations (partialling for political interest and past information seeking about the assassination) are presented in Table 5.

Insert Table 5 Here

After partialling, the February correlations between perceived realism and objective knowledge were not statistically significant. The partial correlation between perceived realism and symbolic knowledge was .23 ($p < .10$). Neither partial was significant for the March administration.

Perceived realism was related, weakly ($r = .17$, $p < .10$) to belief in a shadow government, but for the March administration only.

There was a statistically significant partial correlation between perceived realism and interpersonal discussion of the assassination in February (.25) and in March (.21). There was also a statistically significant negative correlation between the partial for perceived realism and reading about the assassination (-.28), but only for the February administration. After checking the coding several times, it remained negative. While we were at first at a loss to explain this, there may be an explanation. After the fact reasoning often makes things much clearer! The majority of information printed in the mainstream press, the "sanctioned reality," was critical of Stone's presentation of the "facts" about the assassination. To the degree that individuals did read about the assassination, particularly in newspapers and magazines, they would have been exposed to an interpretation of the assassination that differed considerably from the one presented in *JFK*.

Discussion

Our results provide encouraging and discouraging results for those concerned with possible negative effects resulting from exposure to *JFK*. Seeing *JFK* did result in more knowledge about the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. Students who saw the film knew more about the "facts" of the assassination, what we labeled "objective knowledge." Not only did they know more of these objective facts than those who had not seen the film, but they knew quite a bit more, averaging 69% of the objective questions correct compared with 28% correct for those who had not seen the film. Just as the Why *We Fight* propaganda films of the 40s had shown (Lowery & DeFleur, 1988), film is an excellent way to transmit knowledge. This confirmation of much of "sanctioned reality" should be comforting to those concerned about the possible negative influence of *JFK*.

However, *JFK* was also an excellent source for information likely to come from unsanctioned sources, mainly the ideas of Jim Garrison and Oliver Stone. While the people who had not seen the film thought that an average of 42% of "synthetic facts" presented in *JFK* were probably true, 68%

of those who had seen the film accepted their truthfulness. When a presentation as carefully done as *JFK*, on a subject as interesting and important as the assassination of President Kennedy is presented to an audience as removed in time from the actual event as these students (the oldest was 33, the mean age was 21.5), there is a likelihood that both symbolic realities about the assassination, sanctioned and unsanctioned, become a part of the person's subjective reality. A skillfully made film, and *JFK* was definitely that, can integrate its message with existing messages and create a reality for its audience where the difference between "sanctioned" and "unsanctioned" explanations of an event becomes lost. Oliver Stone was able to create a set of "synthetic facts," dramatic reconstructions of the events associated with the Kennedy assassination, that were accepted as part of the symbolic reality of many in our student audience.

Critics might note that *JFK* had no measurable impact on our political mistrust measure. Political mistrust represents a stable set of beliefs about government not directly directly challenged by *JFK*. The film suggested high level corruption: not average people rallying behind honest politicians to change things. This was no *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*. Seeing *JFK* did not make our students less trusting of the political system, at least not directly.

Where Stone suggested the existence of subversive groups determined to maintain control at all costs and when he implied that a group composed of leaders of industry, the military, and the government (including a suggestion that Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson might have been involved in the conspiracy), *JFK* seemed to have more of a direct impact. Students who had seen the film believed more in the existence of a "shadow government," a group of individuals who would do anything—violating the Constitution or assassinating our leaders—to maintain control. This influence was related to seeing *JFK* as realistic, a finding that held for the March administration only. If, as Perse (1990) suggested, a message is perceived as real, then the individual is more likely to elaborate on that message. Our data suggest that this elaboration can take some time, appearing as it did in this study in the March administration of the questionnaire but not in February.

Seeing *JFK* was also associated with discussing the assassination with others. It is not uncommon for people who have seen a film to talk about it, but even in March, at least one month after seeing the film for most people, those who had seen *JFK* were still talking more about it than those who had not. No other communication variables were so influenced. And, while it was not statistically significant in the multiple classification analysis, when we compared all film attenders with non-attenders using a *t*-test, film attenders were more likely to have done a recent communication act than non-attenders (means of .64 to .24 respectively). *JFK* did influence communication activities.

Finally, the perceived reality of *JFK* was related to some aspects of subjective reality. There was a correlation between perceived reality and symbolic knowledge. This finding should be taken as at least suggestive that perceived reality does have a potential influence of perceptions of reality in the short-run. There was no relationship between perceived reality and our March measure of symbolic knowledge.

Perceived reality was, however, related to beliefs of the existence of a shadow government in March, even after controlling for political interest and past information seeking behavior about the assassination. People's *JFK* realism score in March was positively correlated with their belief in a shadow government. We have reasoned that this relationship, the relationship between seeing the film as real and believing in the central theme of the film, that John Kennedy was assassinated by a group loyal to the military industrial complex, takes time to develop. Thinking about the film and the "evidence" it presented results in a greater tendency to believe that Kennedy's death was part of a conspiracy between very powerful elements.

Perceived realism was also related to talking about the film in February, just after seeing the film when you would naturally expect people to talk most about the film. People who saw the film as most realistic talked the most about it (partial = .25). It is also interesting that people who read the most about the film were less likely to see it as realistic (partial = -.28). We had hypothesized a positive relationship between seeing *JFK* as realistic and reading about the assassination. We found a significant negative relationship. Considering that the majority of what has been written in

the mainstream press has been critical of Stone's film, it is not surprising, afterward, to find this negative relationship.

Conclusion

JFK was a powerful film whose message was assimilated by its audience. Students seeing the film were more likely than their non-attending counterparts to know "objective" facts about the assassination, to know the "symbolic" facts about the assassination presented by Oliver Stone, and to believe in the existence of a "shadow government" with great power and influence. Students who saw the film were more likely than non-attenders to discuss the assassination with others and they continued to talked about it for at least three more weeks. As a "synthetic experience" and a "synthetic history" of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, *JFK* was a powerful message.

JFK got its audience to think about the assassination. It stimulated the press into thinking again about the events surrounding John Kennedy's death. It forced the U.S. House of Representatives to consider opening the files on the case, files that were supposed to be closed until 2029. *JFK* received an Oscar nomination as the best film of 1991 and the nearly total condemnation of the establishment press. That is some accomplishment for a movie.

We have, we think, demonstrated that *JFK* did have a significant impact on its audience, significant in the statistical and social sense. People who saw the film thought about the assassination of President Kennedy in November of 1963. They also were thinking about the possibility that government and power in this country may not be distributed exactly as some would like us to believe. Many are uncomfortable with that, many in the press did not like what was said, and many feared that *JFK* would create a level of doubt and mistrust that could be dangerous to our democracy and system of government. Maybe it did, although the answer does not seem quite that simple.

JFK was a movie that made people think and feel, an unusual accomplishment to come out of Hollywood. *JFK* presented a point of view in a manner that utilized the tools of its trade, the

technology of film. The "synthetic experience" created by *JFK* became the basis for a national discussion about the assassination. Isn't that discussion part of the process of coming to closure on what happened to John Kennedy? Couldn't it be said that Oliver Stone has performed a service, by raising the possibility that government can become corrupted, by asking us to be more vigilant, and by creating an environment where the open discussion of one of the primary symbols of violence in our culture, the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, again becomes the topic for debate and investigation?

We don't know the answers. What we did find out was that *JFK* taught and influenced its audience. Whether or not that influence was positive or negative in the long run may have to wait until all of the records on the assassination are again investigated and analyzed. Until then, more people will see the film in the theater and on videotape. More will wonder what really happened in Dallas on November 22, 1963.

Notes

1 The nine items uses were "Money is the most important thing that influences how politicians make up their minds." "People like me don't have any say about what the government does." "Most of our leaders are devoted to the service and good of this country" (reverse coded). "Every vote is important in an election, including yours and mine" (reverse coded). "Nowadays, the average citizen is powerless to influence the decisions or government." "If something bothered people enough, they could get together and change things in Washington" (reverse coded). "I don't think politicians care much about what people like me think." "In order to get elected, candidates make promises they don't intend to keep." "It seems to me that government fails to take necessary steps on important issues, even when most people favor such action."

2 Even though many of the differences had been hypothesized a priori, we used a more conservative Scheffé test for a posteriori differences. The alpha level for the test was .05. For a discussion of the use and properties of the Scheffé test, see Winer (1971, pp. 198-199).

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Table 1

Multiple Classification Analysis
Adjusted Mean Scores for Knowledge (First Order) Measures
February and March

	Objective Knowledge		Symbolic Knowledge	
Independent Measures	February	March	February	March
Grand Mean	3.28	3.29	4.53	4.49
JFK Exposure				
Did Not See	1.68	1.83	3.25	3.45
Saw Before Feb. 6	3.61	3.99	4.74	4.40
Saw Feb. 6 or Later	4.45	4.16	5.49	4.97
Beta	*.68****	*.65****	*.59****	*.39****
Number of Interviews				
One (March Only)		3.12		4.13
Two (February & March)		3.48		4.51
Beta		*.11**		*.11*
Covariates** (% Variation Explained)				
Political Interest	3.5%**			
Magazine Reading		3.1%***		2.0%*
Past Assassination Information		7.0%***	3.0%*	6.2%***
Multiple R^2	52.8%***	54.5%***	43.4%***	25.5%***
Total N	74	139	74	142

Note. Adjusted mean scores represent the estimated means after controlling for covariates and other independent variables. The covariate set included interest in politics, magazine use, newspaper use, television news use, television talk show exposure, and past information seeking about the assassination. Entries are made only for statistically significant covariates.

* $p \leq .10$, ** $p \leq .05$, *** $p \leq .01$

Table 2

Multiple Classification Analysis
Adjusted Mean Scores for Political Orientation (Second Order) Measures
February and March

	Political Mistrust		Shadow Government	
Independent Measures	February	March	February	March
Grand Mean	25.50	24.90	14.16	13.93
JFK Exposure				
Did Not See	24.88	24.12	13.08	12.98
Saw Before Feb. 6	25.21	24.92	13.04	14.13
Saw Feb. 6 or Later	26.09	25.53	15.38	14.60
Beta	*.12*	*.13*	*.40****	*.28****
Number of Interviews				
One (March Only)		24.45		13.80
Two (February & March)		25.42		14.08
Beta		*.10*		*.05*
Covariates** (% Variation Explained)				
Political Interest		2.3%*		
Television News Exposure				2.8%**
Multiple R^2	6.1%	8.9%	19.9%*	11.1%**
Total N	74	140	74	141

Note. Adjusted mean scores represent the estimated means after controlling for covariates and other independent variables. The covariate set included interest in politics, magazine use, newspaper use, television news use, television talk show exposure, and past information seeking about the assassination. Entries are made only for statistically significant covariates.

* $p \leq .10$, ** $p \leq .05$, *** $p \leq .01$

Table 3

Multiple Classification Analysis
Adjusted Mean Scores for Discussion and Reading
February and March

	Discussed Assassination		Read About Assassination	
Independent Measures	February	March	February	March
Grand Mean	2.45	2.46	1.92	2.35
JFK Exposure				
Did Not See	1.72	2.02	1.90	2.43
Saw Before Feb. 6	2.83	2.71	1.86	2.48
Saw Feb. 6 or Later	2.91	2.70	1.95	2.22
Beta	*.51****	*.35****	*.03*	*.10*
Number of Interviews				
One (March Only)		2.54		2.42
Two (February & March)		2.37		2.27
Beta		*.09*		*.07*
Covariates (% Variation Explained)				
Political Interest	3.8%**	1.6%*	6.5%**	
Magazine Reading				3.3%**
Past Assassination Information		6.1%***		6.1%***
Multiple R^2	40.2%***	25.3%***	29.7%***	20.1%***
Total N	74	142	74	142

Note. Adjusted mean scores represent the estimated means after controlling for covariates and other independent variables. The covariate set included interest in politics, magazine use, newspaper use, television news use, television talk show exposure, and past information seeking about the assassination. Entries are made only for statistically significant covariates.

* $p \leq .10$, ** $p \leq .05$, *** $p \leq .01$

Table 4

Multiple Classification Analysis
Adjusted Mean Scores for TV Stories and Recent Communication Acts
February and March

	TV Stories on Assassination		Recent Communication Acts on Assassination[a]	
Independent Measures	February	March	February	March
Grand Mean	2.58	2.70	.08	.49
JFK Exposure				
Did Not See	2.39	2.70	.05	.29
Saw Before Feb. 6	2.80	2.86	.23	.73
Saw Feb. 6 or Later	2.66	2.63	.06	.54
Beta	*.15*	*.07*	*.23*	*.18**
Number of Interviews				
One (March Only)		2.74		.55
Two (February & March)		2.58		.42
Beta		*.10*		*.07*
Covariates (% Variation Explained)				
Television Talk Show Use		2.4%*		
Past Information Seeking	4.0%*	3.3%**	12.5%***	12.4%***
Multiple R^2	15.9%	12.1%**	20.8%**	18.0%***
Total N	74	142	74	142

Note. Adjusted mean scores represent the estimated means after controlling for covariates and other independent variables. The covariate set included interest in politics, magazine use, newspaper use, television news use, television talk show exposure, and past information seeking about the assassination. Entries are made only for statistically significant covariates.

[a]Recent communication acts for February are the sum of three activities: reading a book within the past two months, writing a paper within the past two months, going to the library to look up information about the assassination. For March, the same three activities were added to two other activities: attending a public lecture or presentation within the past three months, reading about the assassination in the campus paper within the past two weeks.

* $p \leq .10$, ** $p \leq .05$, *** $p \leq .01$

Table 5

Zero Order and Partial Correlations Between
Perceived Reality of *JFK* and Dependent Measures
February and March

	February		March	
Dependent Measures	Ø-Order	Partial	Ø-Order	Partial
Knowledge (First Order) Measures				
Objective Knowledge	-.07	-.05	-.11	-.09
Symbolic Knowledge	.24*	.23*	.14*	.06
Political Orientation (Second Order) Measures				
Political Mistrust	-.11	-.12	.07	.01
Belief in a "Shadow Government"	.04	.02	.22**	.17*
Communication Behaviors				
Discussion of Assassination	.21*	.25*	.14*	.21**
Reading About the Assassination	-.26**	-.28**	.00	-.04
TV About the Assassination	-.05	-.02	-.01	-.12
Recent Communication Acts	-.11	-.12	.01	-.03
Ns	44	40	90-92	84

Note. The partial correlation figures represent the correlations after controlling for political interest and past information seeking about the assassination of President Kennedy.

* $p \leq .10$, ** $p \leq .05$, *** $p \leq .01$